

# **Collective Bargaining by Riot**

**Election Day in South Africa**

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Seeing the police move on a single column of smoke rising from two burning tyres over rebellious Khutsong, south-west of Johannesburg, on March 1, local government election day, I was reminded of the Native American warrior in *Dances With Wolves* remarking of the distant fire of a frontiersman that he would not tolerate “a single line of smoke in my own country”.

The ANC-led government in similar fashion had determined that Khutsong would not explode on voting day; that the mockery of the vote that occurred would be “free”, albeit an enforced peace in a township that had driven ANC leaders out, revolting against an administrative transfer out of Gauteng province to an uncertain future in the poverty-stricken North-West.

## **FIRE IN KHUTSONG**

So two armoured Nyalas lumbered over to the smoking tyres where photographers were vainly trying to get a dramatic shot – but Khutsong was virtually deserted on the morning of the vote.

The fire-gutted Gugulethu community centre was already defaced by crude sexual, gangster – and, in what is a hopeful sign, anarchist – graffiti. The presiding officer at the government’s Independent Electoral Commission tent set up next to the ruin glumly told me he did not expect a single soul to turn out to vote that day.

He proved right, with barely more than 200 out of 29,000 registered voters exercising their hard-won right. Khutsong resident Albert Mamela stood near the smouldering tyres and told of his dream that the people of Khutsong – whether Zulu, Xhosa or “foreigner” – could “be like the Bafokeng” – the tribe that owns platinum mines near Rustenburg – and take ownership of Khutsong’s nearby gold-mines, the riches of which seldom finds its way into local pockets.

Community ownership of the mines would render local government irrelevant, he said: “because then we will take care of development ourselves”. There is some healthy anti-capitalist sentiment here, but it is also confused. The Bafokeng royal house controls the mines in question, and exploitation carries on as before. A king makes the economic decisions: this is not the working class ownership and control anarchist-communists advocate .

Khutsong residents accused councillors of nepotism, the provision of toilets that did not work and, worse in their view, not living in the areas they supposedly represented, a common complaint. Mamela claimed that councillors said R1,2-million had been spent on the road to the Khutsong graveyard, whereas he knew it had only cost R800,000, suggesting the councillors had pocketed the rest.

He suggested that Merafong mayor Des van Rooyen had, unlike previous mayors, acquired bodyguards “because he knew what he was going to do” in “selling” Khutsong to the North West province.

But despite the powerful emotions circulating on voting day, Khutsong was suffering a hang-over from the previous night’s celebration of the successful boycott call and was unlikely to produce drama, so I drove on into Gauteng, north-east to the gated suburbs of Houghton to watch former President Nelson Mandela cast his vote.

## **THE APF AND ELECTIONS**

I had far to travel, so bypassed Pimville in Soweto where the Operation Khanyisa Movement (OKM) was contesting the elections. There was a fierce debate in the Anti-Privatisation Forum

(APF) over the question of elections. Trotskyist leader, APF organiser and Soweto activist Trevor Ngwane jumped the gun, forming the OKM as a party and political vehicle for his career and his politics without an APF mandate. In stark contrast to the social movements in areas such as Motsoaledi, Orange Farm and Sebokeng stood firmly by a “no services – no vote” position [although in Motsoaledi, this was later reversed following an internal struggle].

Ngwane’s movement won a paid position as a councillor, based on 4,305 votes.

Ngwane did not take the seat as expected, but the OKM councillor who did will have her lone left-wing voice drowned out by the 75 ANC and 31 DA councillors. Working class power lies in the community and in the workplace, not in the forums of the ruling class. Ngwane was ousted a month later at the Anti-Privatisation Forum annual general meeting as APF chair by Bricket Mokolo of the Orange Farm Crisis Committee – a key figure in the anti-electoral faction of the APF. This is a hopeful sign, for Mokolo has helped build a viable, anti-electoral strategy in that poor settlement.

## THE OTHER HALF

Houghton is old, genteel Joburg, replete with bowling greens, high walls and lanes of poplar trees and oaks, gated with booms and security guards. The old and new elites, with their black maids in tow, were smartly lined up to cast their ballots: no burning tyres here; only the worship of Mandela – the architect of post-apartheid neo-liberalism – as some sort of living saint of the wealthy.

From Houghton, I drove north-east to the small diamond-mine and prison town of Cullinan to the east of Pretoria. There, the local Freedom Front Plus branch – Afrikaner separatists – was hoping to oust the incumbent Democratic Alliance neo-liberals from the Nokeng tsa Taemane Municipality. The ANC won, but the only real excitement on the day was when Afrikaner singer Valiant Swart happened to pass through town.

## MPUMULANGA

From Cullinan, I drove out to Siyabuswa in Mpumalanga, the former capital of the apartheid-era homeland of kwaNdebele, because here, the Ministry of Provincial and Local Government had promised me, was an example of a municipality that, while not wealthy, was exceptionally well run.

Siyabuswa means “we are governed”, but I found that the way that governance works sadly conforms to the patterns of endemic corruption so well established in apartheid days.

Residents such as Amos and Elisabeth Msiza and their friend Petros Mhlangu – all in their fifties – complained that their water-supply (charged at a rate guessed by the council because their meters didn’t work) was intermittent and that they lost their pre-paid electrical power whenever it rained.

“If you have money, this government helps you – but not those who struggle,” Mhlangu said.

The three residents blamed unelected municipal manager George Mthimunye for Siyabuswa’s shoddy service delivery.

Their view was supported by ex-ANC independent candidates such as July Msiza who told me that Mthimunye faced not only criminal charges of having sexually harassed his secretary, but

was also accused of having stolen council funds to pay for two friends of his to be trained as traffic officers (one of whom allegedly crashed a council vehicle she was illegally using for her own purposes, in far-off White River). So much for well-governed Siyabuswa!

## **TWELVE YEARS ON**

Fast-forward to April 27, “Freedom Day”, twelve years down the line from what Archbishop Desmond Tutu memorably called the “Rainbow Nation” waiting to make their mark in the first post-apartheid ballot.

And what a mark it has been: from the heart-rending wail of Fort Callata’s mother at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings to the ascendancy of the Black Economic Enrichment phalanx into positions of capitalist and state power; from the collapse of the neo-fascist AWB to the rise of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka as a possible future president thanks to the axing of Jacob Zuma.

Trevor Manuel is the darling of this elite and its middle-class praise-singers, for whom fiscal discipline is a golden calf and equality a sin. This mutual admiration society has decreed a perpetual round of expensive parties to praise the near-feudal conditions on which their empires are built, a perpetual celebration so to speak (I’m reminded of Jello Biafra’s phrase “the happiness you have demanded is now mandatory!”).

But millions look set to be unemployed for life and HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, malaria and ailments of malnutrition such as kwashiorkor and marasmus – usually associated in the popular imagination with famine in Sudan or the Horn of Africa – stalk the population.

Last May, at the second annual National Security Conference, two analysts from very different sectors had a dire warning for the country: COSATU chief economist Dr Neva Makgetla and Standard Bank credit policy and governance director Desmond Golding agreed that a highly educated but permanently unemployed “underclass” constituted the country’s biggest security threat. The working class is retreating, but not defeated, and it haunts the imagination of those who rule this country.

## **UNFREEDOM DAY**

Further rioting and arson in Khutsong attended the elevation of councillors to office on the basis of a 2% poll – an election that Human Sciences Research Council society culture and identity specialist Dr Mncedisi Ndletyana rightly described during a TV interview as “illegitimate”.

The official celebration was declared an “unFreedom Day” by the poor in Durban who decried the evaporation of the dream of equality the 1994 elections had promised, but which the elites had betrayed. They demanded an end to evictions, cut-offs and forced relocations, saying they were fighting for unconditional access to the resources fenced off by the rich.

Local government specialist Greg Ruiters of Rhodes University told me that the yawning chasm between the developmental promises of neo-liberalism and the grinding poverty of South Africa’s sprawling shackland (three out of every four South Africans now lives in urban areas) would increasingly see people take to direct action.

“The key problem for all parties contesting the local government elections,” Ruiters said, “is that citizens have discovered another, more direct, channel for giving voice to their needs: ‘collective bargaining by riot’ may become more common than waiting to vote.”

The key problem for all the poor, however, is that electoral, representative politics is so limited and disempowering. As Sheila Meintjies of Wits University’s political studies department put it, “there is a growing sense that the councillors don’t necessarily hold all the power, that the officials are really, if anything, to blame for a lack of service delivery.”

These unelected municipal officials, she said, were directly lobbied by very powerful big-business interests that short-circuited the country’s bourgeois-democratic process and skewed development in favour of the rich.

A grim example of this powerful bureaucratic class is eThekweni (Durban) municipal manager Mike Sutcliffe, an ANC strategist and die-hard opponent of the Abahlali baseMjondolo (Shack-dwellers’ Movement), whose protest marches he illegally tried to ban.

In March, Sutcliffe and his ideological cohorts suffered two key court defeats — by the Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Soweto Concerned Residents — which confirmed the absolute right of people to gather and to demonstrate without requiring police permission. This is a big victory for the social movements that they should fully exploit.

## **WORKING CLASS DEMOCRACY**

We anarchist communists would go further than Meintjies, underlining that it is simply impossible for the country’s 400 Members of Parliament to truly represent the interests of 46.9-million people. It is even less likely that 37 very wealthy party-political Cabinet Ministers, tainted by the elitist idea of “democratic centralism” will bend over backwards for the working class and poor. Both our Westminster-style parliamentary democracy and the ANC’s “democratic centralism” are anything but democratic.

The elections of 1994 were a huge victory inasmuch as apartheid’s doom was sealed. But there were not enough, and could never be enough, and their achievement is increasingly overshadowed by the grim neo-liberal class war being waged by the ruling elite. Capitalism, with its class system, will always benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Activists in Swaziland and Zimbabwe should take heed. Real popular empowerment and real economic and social equality can only be achieved by well-organised, mass-based, directly-democratic, community-controlled action against the parasite class. “Collective bargaining by riot” is a good start, but we must build working class power until we can move onto the offensive, and remake the world.

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A field report on a trip transsecting South Africa's industrial heartland and its outlying small towns on municipal election day 2006 – and an examination of who actually wields municipal power in the country – from the ZACF journal *Zabalaza* #7.

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